

**This interview with
LEO SARKISIAN
was conducted by the Library of Congress
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Leo Sarkisian

Library of Congress: How did you first decide to go and record indigenous music?

Leo Sarkisian: When I was in high school, I had a very good art teacher who told me to go to Boston when I graduated and enroll in a school of art there.

I lived in Massachusetts, and so, when I graduated, I hitchhiked--in the 1930s, we had no money --from Lawrence, Massachusetts to Boston. The art teacher gave me an address for a school so I took a portfolio of my sketches and, when I got to Boston, I went up and I knocked on the door of the director of the art school.

The director was there. I walked in and the man said, "Yes, how can I help you?"

I went up to the desk and put my portfolio on his desk and I said, I wanted to come to his school but I had no money.

And, right then, just looking at my sketches, he offered me a three-year scholarship and said I could start in September.

It was a three-year course--illustration, architecture, advertising art, book illustration, all kinds of things. I was about to graduate when my family contacted me and told me I had gotten a draft card in the mail. My family went to them though and told them "Leo is going to graduate in one month. Can you wait?" So they let me finish school.

Then [once in the military] I went to Camp Edwards in Massachusetts and was put in a topographical company; they knew I was an artist. So I went to complete training for maps. That was 1941.

After I finished my 13-week training, they sent me to Providence, to the main office, the headquarters, they were setting up.

They had a colonel there when I arrived and the first thing the colonel said to me was "Can you make a portrait of me?"

I said, "Sure!" I made a nice drawing.

After about one month, I was told, "You're going overseas. You'll be part of the topographical company in military intelligence."

The war had just begun. A lot of people don't know that the war began in North Africa.

I made the landing in Africa. I climbed a mountain til we got to a city and the headquarters. They immediately put me in the office of Invasion Planning. They put me to work on the first plans for the first invasion of Italy. I knew every a secret place; I worked on the plans.

One day, the Colonel said, "You are attached to the Special Forces, because you know where all the landings are." I made that first landing with our first commandoes. We set up a first military headquarters before the invasion.

I worked with the lead of the group, he had to ask me where to go. We were part of the main invasion, the big third division. We made the first landing in Italy, the Mountecassino fight, with the first group in the Roman liberation.

Then they pulled me back to Naples to work on plans for France.

I made that landing and went all through France, into the mountains. I was with the first group to cross the Rhine. Then onto Germany and Austria. I did that whole bit....

Then, when the war ended in 1945, I came back went to New York City to work as an artist. I had an uncle living in New York who had a photo engraving shop. I'm Armenian and Armenians were known at that time for their skills in that. My uncle gave me a desk and a space to work as a commercial artist in his shop.

My uncle found me a place to live. I lived in the Village. A small room above a bar.

But right from the first day, every day, any spare time I had, I was at the New York Public Library studying, studying...

In high school, I was a clarinetist. In high school, I'd go on my bike 11 miles to Haverhill. There was an Armenian violinist who lived in Haverhill. Every Saturday, I would go to his home and learn Middle Eastern music theory and practice my clarinet....

Boston was a great port for the first immigrants to the United States. This was before Ellis Island. My father had been a refugee from the Ottoman Empire, he escaped the genocide that happened there. My father was 10 or 11, when he came with his father on a small American freighter. My father came in 1900 to the United States.

He settled in Lawrence, Massachusetts. There were a lot of the folk musicians there. All of the ethnic communities were very close and they'd play music on Sundays at picnics. That's where I first absorbed all the rhythms and discovered the Arabic lute.

The instrument that really fascinated me was the canon, it's a harp with 74 strings.

I kept my music going even though I was an artist. All through the war. When I came back, I went to New York City. I did illustrations for text books.

While I was in New York in my small apartment one day, I got a knock one day. I answered it. It was man with a fancy sport coat and hat. He said, "I'm Colonel Fogel from Hollywood.

I read some of your notes on world music.”

I had been studying Asian and African music and I felt that there was something missing in the books already written on those topics, so I made a lot of notes. And a friend of mine, an artist friend, somehow got those notes to Hollywood to this man.

He said, “I’ve been looking for someone like you. You speak various languages. Would you like to come work for me, for my company?”

And I turned my career right then and there!

First, though, I told the man, “I have to go back to Massachusetts because I’ve been courting a girl and the families want us to get married.”

I met my wife when she was in the Navy.

When we first got discharged, we went to an Armenian dance. That’s where we met; we liked each other.

I was going to ask my family. I was going to tell them I was interested in her. She asked her family. Thank God the two families liked each other! In Armenian culture, you have to get the family blessing first.

We got married in Lawrence. I immediately took her straight to Hollywood. We went to Beverly Hills.

Colonel [Irving] Fogel was one of the best known music producers. He was the head of Tempo Records. Everyone knew him. He did music for the movie industry. He was close friends with Walt Disney.

When we arrived at his address—it was the biggest, most beautiful English castle! In Beverly Hills! A REAL CASTLE!

He told us, “This is your home while you’re working for me!”

I went to the office and started editing music. I learned about music production from him. How to edit for movies and recording. He was surprised how quickly I learned.

After one year, he made me Director of International Music Production. And I ended up doing music for movies. I did “The African Queen” and six “Tarzan” films.

When he thought I was ready, he said, “I already have your next--” He made arrangements with Afghan and Pakistan radio stations. He wanted me to help with their radio stations.

My wife and I went to Afghanistan.

That was 1950. I went to the first American embassy [there]. There was a small contingent of American Marines there and the first ambassador.

I was there only two weeks and I became a close friend of the King of the country....

I started helping them in the radio station. They only had one engineer. I helped them with their programming; I got on the air.

Armenian music is very close to Afghan music. I was supposed to be working there for eight months but stayed three and a half years. I was the first to go around Afghan to record their music.

Like I said, I was there three years: I was the only one allowed to travel around the country—the only foreigner. I covered the entire country. The only ones who got angry were the Russians; they didn't like anyone up by their border.

I met such interesting people—from China, traveling in the Himalayans. One morning, in the snow, I got out of my hut and there was a whole group of horsemen there. I walked right up to the group—I gave him a good ole American handshake.

Another horseman pulled out a lute. He said, "I heard you were interested in our music."

So I spent the whole night with that leader. We drank a whole bottle of vodka. He asked about my American family. I asked about his family. And that became my whole mission in my life.... Making friends.

We recorded in 85 countries...we went into towns and villages. We were often the first Americans people every met. We made friends, made connections.

That became our career.... Meeting all these people. People just like us. So many different groups.... So many friends...so many stories....

In between I helped Radio Pakistan, we went to Bangladesh. We made a lot of rare recordings and sent them all back to Hollywood.

At the end of three and a half years, Fogel came to see us. He said, "You're going to Africa!"

The countries were just becoming independent. First, we went to Ghana. We got there on their independence day. I was with Radio Ghana for about a year. We traveled together and covered the entire country of Ghana.

Then we made arrangements to go to Guinea. We drove right into Guinea. We were there one week and made friends with the President.

He was surprised that I knew French so good. He said we were free to travel; he gave us permission.

Library of Congress: How were you recruited by Voice of America? It involved Edward R. Murrow, didn't it?

LS: Yes, while I was there [in Africa]—in 1960-61. Edward R. Murrow had just become the head of the United States Information Agency. His first trip was to Guinea.

He came to my apartment, which overlooked the presidential palace. Ed Murrow walked up the three flights of stairs. He knocked. I went to the door. Right then, Murrow was lighting up a cigarette and he turned to me and said, "I'm Ed Murrow. Are you Leo?"

We sat down. Right then and there, he recruited me for Voice of America. He said, "You're going to be the music director for Africa. "When you come back to DC, come and see me."

We got a small apartment in Washington, DC. And I went to the headquarters of the USIA at 1776 on Pennsylvania Avenue.

It only took me 15 minutes to be made a Foreign Service Officer, because I had already been cleared because of my military experience.

And in May 1965, I came out with my first program--“Music Time in Africa.”

And it has been on the air for over 48 years.

LOC: Once the show was “founded,” how did you proceed from there?

LS: After the first recordings in Ghana we called Col. Fogel about issuing them. We called them “New Sounds from a New Nation.” Then we did the one from Guinea. All the recordings were put on an LP for Tempo Records.

They [the African people] loved their own music. I loved their own music. I got carried away with it. I had always been studying it.

All the African music! In Nigeria there are 250 ethnic groups and 250 dialects and languages! There are 16 in Liberia! We all got carried away with all that stuff!

I was allowed to be my own boss. I stayed as long as I wanted. I stayed until I could feel their rhythm, just like them.

My wife would help me. She’d put up the microphones. And, before you’d know it, we’d get up and dance! That’s how important the traditional music is. And that’s what I based my programs on. People were interested in Africa in hearing the music of other countries—for the first time, there was no other way to hear it, to hear each other.

We were there way before the BBC. We were the first ones. Even though Britain had sent some ethnomusicologists over, they just made [the recordings] for themselves so that they could make money, not give it back to Africa. When we made it, we gave all the records back. We gave away hundreds of records. People started calling me “Leo the Music Man.”

LOC: What was early reaction like to the program?

In 1965, the first [program] I did was Ghana music.

We used to get 8,000 letters a month! Fan mail. We’d answer every letter, my wife and I. And we put out a small newsletter. That’s what made the program popular.

When I went back to Ghana, on the airplane there were some US diplomats. When we got off the plane, there was a police escort. They thought it was for them. But it was for me! They were left standing there. The President’s car picked *me* up.

LOC: Didn’t you retire from the program at one time?

LS: Oh, I never left. I took a “retirement” but my boss at Voice of America asked me back to run my library. I have a big library. I kept going. I couldn’t leave my show. I was on contract to USIA—they didn’t have anyone else to send out on cultural speaking engagements. I did [the show] until I found someone who could take it over.

LOC: Why do you think your program has endured so?

LS: My show was about getting into the *meaning* of the music—that's so important. It was not just recordings to sell. I used to get the letters—"Oh, my father and mother were up dancing to the radio!"

My show was used to draw people into the VOA. They'd hear my music and then, "And now here's news about Africa." That was part of our mission.

We have been apolitical all of our lives; we were not working for any administration.

You know, Edward R. Murrow once spoke about the "last three feet." He said, the most crucial link in an exchange is the last three feet, personal contact, one person talking to another; "In a journey of 10,000 miles only the last three feet matter."

My wife kept a diary of all those years. Our families never really knew what we were doing. We just had it published for our family. We called it "The Last Three Feet."

That has been what our lives have been about, that "last three feet."